

Why Did Time-Life Bury the Zapruder Film? Version of Time Inc.'s Editorial Director Doesn't Stand Up

Richard B. Stolley is the editorial director of all Time Inc. magazines. In one of those magazines, Entertainment Weekly (1/17/92), Stolley described how he pulled off "one of the great scoops in journalism": In 1963, as Life magazine's Los Angeles bureau chief, he bought exclusive rights to Abraham Zapruder's home movie of the Kennedy assassination. Stolley's "behind-the-scenes" article contradicted the historical record—including earlier accounts from Stolley himself—and prompted this letter from FAIR.

In your recent account of your acquisition of the Zapruder film for Time-Life, you offer a series of "facts" to rebut "conspiracy buffs" who hint that you personally were part of the plot. While it's safe to assume you aren't a conspirator, it's troubling that your rebuttal is so disingenuous.

- You deny that Life publisher C.D. Jackson, who you note "had served in military intelligence," had any opportunity "to influence how the magazine handled the Zapruder film."

This doesn't square with your November 1973 article in Esquire, "What Happened Next..." which stated: "The film was shown to Time Inc. executives in New York. Life's publisher, the late C.D. Jackson, was so upset by the head-wound sequence that he proposed the company obtain all rights to the film and withhold it from

public viewing at least until emotions had calmed. To this day the film has never been shown publicly."

- You write that "Life did not bury the Zapruder film for 12 years, as [Oliver] Stone charges."

Yet Life fought tenaciously for 12 years to keep independent analysis of the film from the public. Consider the plight of Josiah Thompson, author of *Six Seconds in Dallas*, a book-length examination of the Zapruder film. Thompson's belief in a conspiracy was solidified after being hired as a consultant by Life to analyze the film. When Thompson began work on his book, Life refused to grant Thompson reproduction rights to the film's frames. After Thompson's publisher offered Life all the profits from the book in exchange for publication rights to the frames, the magazine still refused. When the book was finally published with artist-drawn charcoal reproductions of the key frames, Life brought suit to stop the distribution and sale of the book. (See "Life Sues to Enjoin Book on Assassination of Kennedy," *Publishers Weekly*, 12/25/67.)

Time-Life refused to allow the film to be seen as a motion picture, which would clarify—among other questions—Kennedy's movement in reaction to the fatal shot. The company turned down major sums of money from movie makers and TV networks, refusing to sell the rights for even one-time usage.

- You claim that Life immediately printed "all the relevant images except for frame 313"—the fatal head shot.

While preventing the public from seeing the film as a moving picture, or key frames in full sequence, Life journalists repeatedly misrepresented what the film showed. One article (12/6/63) stated that Oswald shot JFK in the throat from the rear by claiming—falsely—that the film showed the president turning far around to wave to the crowd. Another article, which featured a few of the film's frames (10/2/64), wrongly asserted that the fatal shot caused Kennedy's "skull to explode forward."

Your article ends by arguing that our country might be better off if there had been no Zapruder film, since it led to "wild allegations, totally unproved, of dark crimes committed at the highest levels of American government and society." Suspicions about the "highest levels of society" are fanned when elite news organizations, such as Time-Life, continue to distort facts related to the assassination and other matters. Your latest account continues the pattern.

You say that considerations of taste led Life to hoard the Zapruder film. This may well be true. We don't believe establishment news media are part of a giant conspiracy. We do believe they are too close to governmental and corporate power. One need not believe in a conspiracy of any kind to observe that Time-Life's actions regarding the Zapruder film were journalistically indefensible. □